

How gay dads manage without paid paternity leave ^[1]

Author: Bowen, Alison

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EXCERPTS

When his first daughter was born in 2009, Brent Wright, like many parents, did not have paid paternity leave.

Unlike many parents, he and his spouse faced some unique challenges. Because both are men, neither parent had access to a paid maternity leave policy. Because they adopted, their time away from the office began with travel to a nearby city to meet the birth mother.

To make time for bonding at home with their new daughter, they cobbled together vacation and sick days while Wright, 51, negotiated a leave of absence to stay home with newborn Olivia. Scrambling to finagle time with their daughter complicated their entry into parenthood.

"That was very stressful," Wright said.

Wright is not alone. The federal Family and Medical Leave Act guarantees eligible workers up to 12 weeks of job-protected, unpaid leave. But when it comes to paid paternity leave, just 14 percent of civilian workers had access to paid family leave in 2016, according to Pew Research Center.

In contrast, nearly every member of the European Union provides at least 14 weeks of paid maternity leave, according to the Institute for Women's Policy Research, and 84 countries offer some paid leave to fathers.

Limited leave policies disproportionately impact gay dads and adoptive parents, argues Paid Leave for the United States, an organization pushing for expanded paid leave. A June report examined policies at 44 of the country's largest employers and found the majority gave little or no paid parental leave to dads and adoptive parents. This makes the first weeks of parenthood for gay dads difficult - scrambling to find time to settle in a new son or daughter, securing and paying for child care.

"The transition of parenthood can look really, really different for these families," said Abbie Goldberg, a psychology professor at Clark University in Worcester, Mass., whose research includes adoption dynamics and transitions to parenthood for same-sex couples. "The policies that we're seeing that are still in place continue to be gendered, and that's really problematic."

Beyond access to paid leave, gay dads face challenges straight couples don't, said Kenneth Matos, who researches work-life issues and is vice president at consulting firm Life Meets Work. Often, dads adopt, which can include travel and an unpredictable timeline. Surrogacy and adoption can also be expensive, leaving couples with less ability to sacrifice one spouse's salary by staying home. And dads with families who do not support them after they come out don't have a relative to call on for child care help.

Without paid leave, Joe and Shane Mowery rationed a year's worth of vacation days to take off two weeks together when their daughter, Josslyn, was born through a surrogate in March 2016. But the Orland Park, Ill., couple's respective careers - a metro president for Devry and a real estate attorney - didn't jell well with stepping completely away.

"We were both in a situation where there wasn't backup," said Joe Mowery, 39. "I was basically sitting at my computer all day long with her at my lap."

Limited paternity leave especially burdens gay dads adopting older children, who have an acute need for acclimation and bonding.

"There's trust issues, or someone's been hopping around from foster home to foster home," said Eric Rosswood, an author and speaker on LGBT parenting issues. "They may be thinking, 'I'm not going to be here for very long until I go onto the next home.'"

The unpredictable nature of adoption can also complicate conversations with employers.

Adam Tarosky, 35, and Tyler Jeffrey, 33, became parents after a yearlong process with potential adoptions that fell through for various reasons.

"(Each time) we had to start thinking about and start saying to co-workers and saying to families, 'We're not sure where this is going to go,'" Jeffrey said. "You're thinking, 'Am I going to have to drop everything?'"

When they got the call about a baby almost due, it was March 4 of last year. Their son, Owen, was born March 10.

"We joke that we were pregnant for six days," Jeffrey said.

The Washington, D.C., couple traveled to Tulsa, Okla., where they stayed for weeks while the adoption was finalized. Tarosky, a federal attorney, used saved-up sick and vacation days. Jeffrey, a real estate agent, negotiated time off while co-workers helped with clients.

"But you always want more time, especially with a new little one at home," Tarosky said.

Beyond work leave, adoption made finding a nanny or a slot in day care tricky.

"It's not like they can count on a nine-month lead time. They kind of wanted to know, 'When should we expect this child?'" Tarosky recalled. "And, of course, we couldn't tell them."

Even the process of securing paternity leave can be delicate for gay dads. Instead of announcing a pregnancy, they might tell employers that they plan to become parents, but they're not sure exactly when. In the case of adoption, advance notice is not always an option. With a surrogate, they may need time to travel. Professional conversations quickly become personal, and not all employers support gay employees.

All these complexities are why Rosswood, 37, penned the new book "The Ultimate Guide for Gay Dads: Everything You Need to Know About LGBTQ Parenting But Are (Mostly) Afraid to Ask."

During his own experience adopting 4-year-old son Connor, born in Iowa while they lived in California, he and his husband encountered challenges not typically covered in basic parenting manuals - securing birth certificates, preparing travel documents, what to tell airport security guards wondering why two men are traveling with a newborn who doesn't look like them.

Despite these unique obstacles, Rosswood said, many gay dads arrive at parenthood incredibly prepared. They often have waited years to become fathers, saving money for adoption and securing career stability. So although dads encounter challenges not faced by most straight couples, many said the ability to parent at all has been an unexpected gift.

Wright and his husband were together for 15 years before starting a family. They waited, in part, to secure financial stability and flexibility, but also because neither grew up with models for gay parenthood.

"It wasn't until we were together that long that we started to see that shift in society," he said.

Paid time off was key when their second daughter, Noelle, was born in 2012. When they said yes to a proposed adoption, "Twenty-four hours later we were notified she had gone into labor."

By then, working in a new job as the chief program officer at the Family Equality Council, Wright was able to combine the nongendered leave policy - employees can take at least four paid weeks of parental leave within 12 months of a birth, adoption or foster care placement - with accrued vacation and sick time to take three paid months.

This allowed him to stay with toddler Olivia and ready their Andover, Mass., home while his husband traveled to Pennsylvania for the birth and to await adoption paperwork. A week later, all met in a Philadelphia hotel to welcome the newest member of their family - without the stress of juggling vacation days or fielding work demands.

"It was like a huge, huge pressure off my shoulders," Wright said. "The bonding piece of it is so important, and you really don't want to shortchange it."

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